

King of mercy (Luke 23:33-43)

Unlike many politicians, Jesus did what he said he would do.

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

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Late in his life, Karl Barth frequently preached to a captive audience in the Basel city jail. One upstanding Basel citizen said he was tempted to commit a crime so he would be sent to jail and could hear Barth preach.

Along with preaching to the inmates, Barth sometimes offered communion. He also visited inmates in their cells and earned their trust so that some would confess their crimes to him. On some occasions he would hand out big cigars. Imagine how the prison smelled if the inmates all lit up at the same time.

In one jail sermon Barth preached about the crucifixion, with special comments on the two criminals hanging on either side of Jesus. One was petulant, unrepentant, and derisive of Jesus, who this criminal thought should save them all. The other was transparent about his guilt, and he asked Jesus to remember him in paradise. To be remembered, to be known, to be recognized—that is a fundamental human need.

A theologian was asked by his sister where heaven is. He said he didn't know but he'd think about it. Later she asked again. He responded, "I don't know where heaven is, but wherever it is, God is there." Wherever paradise is, God met this criminal there.

In his reflection on the three crosses, Barth made the audacious claim that these three men formed the first Christian community. It would be easy to believe that Barth would include the criminal who wanted to be remembered by Jesus in paradise. But the other one who, like the soldiers who taunted Jesus, challenged his messiahship? He too would be remembered in paradise? Does that not sound like cheap grace?

In a similar sermon on the crucifixion, Barbara Brown Taylor said: "One cross makes a crucifix. Three crosses make a church."

Too soon we forget that Jesus came to minister to the sick, not the well, the sinners, not the self-righteous. That Jesus might have forgiven the first criminal may offend our moral sensibilities. We tend to want mercy for ourselves and justice—punitive justice—for other people. As the hymn puts it, "But we make God's love too narrow / By false limits of our own" ("There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," by Frederick W. Faber).

The church in Toledo, Ohio, that I pastored for a few years was broken into three times in short succession. The thieves took sound equipment and computers, items they could quickly pawn for cash. After the third time, a group of young people were charged and tried. The church implored the judge to let us engage in restorative justice with these young people. The judge declined in the case of several young men who were repeat offenders. But he agreed we could work outside the court system with a young woman for whom this was her first offence.

Her parents were divorced, and she and her boyfriend, one of the repeat offenders, lived with her father—the pastor of a mainline congregation in Toledo. He told me he had bad feelings about this young man and was relieved he got caught. Both parents were immensely grateful that our church wanted to work with their errant daughter in a redemptive manner outside the court system. We spared her the court charge of \$10,000.

I have not kept up with this woman. I don't know the trajectory of her life after she worked off her debt to the church. But at least we offered her a second chance, a chance to reconsider the life course she was on. We offered her the love of Christ, not the power of the state or the court system.

Reign of Christ Sunday gives us pause to think about the nature of Jesus' kingship, a kingship not focused on the exercise of power or the drive to win at all costs. Jesus' kingship is about serving others, about ministering to the least of these, about accepting suffering on the cross rather than subjecting others to suffering.

When I first started reading warnings about the dangers of Christian nationalism, I thought they were overwrought. It seemed to me that Christian nationalism was real but not a major force to reckon with. How wrong I was! Christian nationalism is not only a threat to American democracy but a threat to the integrity of the Christian church.

If you want to take the measure of Jesus' kingship (his vocation), review his inaugural address (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus was called to "proclaim good news to the poor ... freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free." Unlike many politicians, Jesus made good on his campaign pledges. He did what he said he would do. This is the kind of king we follow.